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The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy

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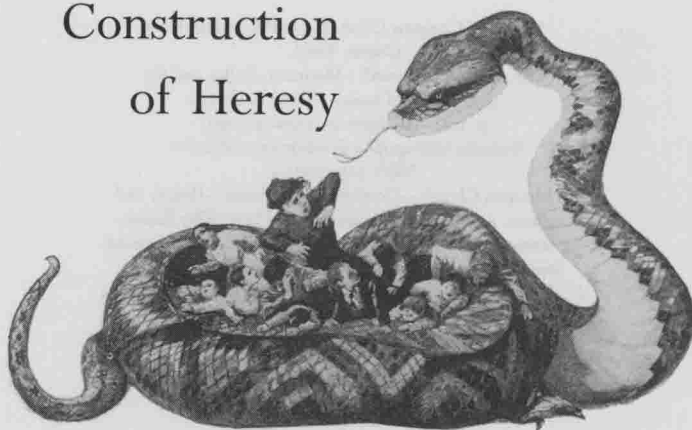
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Mormons,
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TERRYL L. GIVENS

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Introduction



*Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever
they are not consciously held to be fictive.*

Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*

In the heyday of the American humorous tradition, few subjects were off limits. If Artemus Ward could swagger through a defeated Richmond gloating and joking about Confederate defeats before the blood had even stopped flowing, surely that American curiosity known as Mormonism could hardly hope to escape unscathed. Ward, in fact, would devote the second half of his *Travels* (1865) to that very subject. The section called "Among the Mormons" contains a short fiction entitled "A Mormon Romance: Reginald Gloverson." It is not really a story, and hardly—at only nine pages—a sketch. There is no plot to the piece, just a "young and thrifty Mormon, with an interesting family of twenty young and handsome wives" who dies and leaves his widows to argue about which one gets to put flowers on his grave. Then they are summarily "inherited" by the next eager polygamist who arrives on the scene and makes a collective proposal to the collective "Widow Gloverson." In attempting to draw a conclusion from this story, Ward writes, "does not the moral of this romance show that—does it not, in fact, show that . . .—well, never mind what it *shows*. Only this writing Mormon romances is confusing to the intellect. You try it and see."¹

Ward's difficulty in drawing morals from Mormon practices may be excused him. Certainly humor does not need to justify itself in terms other than the effect it produces, and Ward here, as elsewhere, is in fact very funny. Actually, however, his illustration "shows" a great deal as well. While distortion of one kind or another is an inevitable consequence of literary representation, caricature is especially revealing of social or political circumstances that the author is motivated to represent. Caricature tends to illuminate what is valued

and what is shunned by various social groups at various historical junctures. Edward Said has said that cultural “self-confirmation” in general is “based on a constantly practiced differentiation of itself from what it believes to be not itself. And this differentiation is frequently performed by setting the valorized culture over the Other.”² Caricature represents one mode of exaggerating otherness that happens to be entertaining at the same time that it is self-defining.

In the case of Ward, by selecting the romance genre as a vehicle for his piece, he sets up a series of expectations that include such elements as binary relationships, mutual love interests, and happy resolutions. In the world of Mormon polygamy, however, all such expectations are hopelessly dashed, and the narrative collapses in on itself as a result of the failure of generic conventions to negotiate the unfamiliar terrain of mass courtships, collective rivalries, and the hitherto unimagined complexities of plural widowhood and bereavement. This may all be “confusing to the intellect” indeed, although it makes for great farce.

Ward’s intellectual discomfiture in the absence of applicable methods of tried and true literary closure may very well have been only half-feigned. For the larger confusion of which his parody is but a shadow is the more serious discomfiture of an American public when faced with the many unprecedented threats to orthodoxy—religious, cultural, and social—Mormonism posed. Ward’s difficulty in reducing Mormonism to moralistic romance, in other words, has its parallel in the resistance of Mormonism to the larger contemporary societal modes of understanding and control. His comic sketch also shows that differences so extreme as to defy assimilation into familiar literary structures may require more innovative methods of representation if they are to be disarmed and contained. As we will see, most creators of Mormon characters have tended to choose methods more alarmist than comic.

Fictional depictions of Mormonism, then, may serve as more than barometers of hostility or contempt, or as examples of their cultural propagation. Fiction—popular fiction especially—may take us beyond the historical origins of anti-Mormonism to register not just the presence of conflict and contention, but the psychological and ideological causes and consequences of those tensions among the non-Mormon populace.

In the context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, popular depictions of Mormonism both revealed and exploited any number of anxieties and contradictions involving a vast readership’s sense of self and of nation. At the same time, as I hope to show, writers of popular fiction made use of their craft to work toward resolutions of the dilemmas Mormonism posed to mainstream culture. The imaginatively rendered instances of the “Mormon Problem” and the creative solutions to that problem that fiction made possible have a great deal to tell us about how identity can be threatened, manipulated, and constituted.

The list of authors who resorted to the Mormon caricature as a stock villain spans genres from mystery to western to popular romance, and it includes both American and English writers: from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes mystery to Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*, from Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* to Jack London's *Star Rover*, as well as scores of novels, short stories, and poems by lesser names. Such works of fiction can add a great deal to our understanding of the long and tumultuous relationship between Mormonism and American society.

Historical reasons for ridicule of and even hostility toward the Mormon religion vary with both the period and setting of the Mormon story. The earliest recorded complaints concerned the church's religious peculiarity based on ongoing revelation and additional scripture and the threat its phenomenal missionary success posed to mainstream churches. In addition, Mormons preached an irksome doctrine of exclusivity and engaged in communalistic economic practices (and prosperously besides). Unlike the Shakers, who considered their unconventional way of life a higher order of existence but only for those who felt the call to so live, the Mormons claimed a monopoly on the path to salvation.

These irritants would later be exacerbated by polygamy, the most notorious of their religious practices. Although this doctrine was not publicly announced until 1852, was never practiced by more than a small minority,³ and was abandoned in 1890 or shortly thereafter, Mormonism from the mid-nineteenth century to the present has been synonymous in the minds of many with plural marriage. Add to this the Mormons' role in frontier politics and the theocratic inclinations of the early Mormon leaders and we begin to get a sense of the complex of factors that contributed to the "Mormon problem."

The relationship between the sociopolitical context of the period and the Mormon persecutions has traditionally been the province of the historian and has been well excavated. Still, the situation described by historians of Mormonism Leonard J. Arrington and Jon Haupt has changed little since their 1970 pronouncement that "few scholars have sought to improve their understanding of Latter-day Saint or Mormon history through a systematic analysis of fictional works which treat the Mormons."⁴ The following study in no way constitutes a historical overview of the extensive body of anti-Mormon literature. It attempts, rather, to suggest that certain representational patterns we find in some of these works may contribute to our understanding of such issues as anti-Mormon persecution, the construction of heresy, and the construction of collective identity.

When neither militia, armies, prohibitions, nor divestment could succeed in quelling the Mormon menace, popular fiction provided a new front. Consistently recurring patterns in these representations reveal a proclivity to depict

the Mormons as a violent and peculiar people. Physical and psychological coercion define the action, and Oriental, exotic characteristics define the villains. These representations contributed effectively to the refashioning of Mormonism from a religious sect into a secular entity, whose unpalatable religious features could the more easily be made the objects of public ridicule and censure. For, although the political and cultural conflicts Mormonism provoked were real enough, the peculiar challenges the new faith posed to religious orthodoxy—and the legitimate mechanisms available to meet them—were especially difficult to negotiate in the context of Jacksonian democracy and its heritage. Fiction made it possible to reconfigure this conflict in terms that were consistent with American conceptions about the nature and limits of religious pluralism—and America's premiere role in that tradition.

This is therefore a book about fiction and its political uses. And one of those political uses may be the ability to reconfigure in fictional terms a debate that is rooted—or at least entangled—in fundamentally religious conflicts. Specifically, I intend to show how fiction has served, in the case of Mormonism, to obscure the theological aspects of a century and more of discord and confrontation between Mormonism and American society. These religious roots of the conflict preceded the first allegations of polygamy, permeated the Missouri Wars and Illinois expulsion, continued into the Utah period, and inform the marginalization of Mormonism in contemporary religious thought. In the process, I hope to illuminate both the peculiar nature of the Mormon “heresy” and the contortions by which that heresy was reconstructed into a target more amenable to social censure and political solutions.

The phrase “viper on the hearth,” which *Cosmopolitan* used to characterize Mormonism in 1911, suggests the urgency of a threat that has invaded the domestic sphere. The metaphor compounds outrage over an incursion that has already been successful with a reminder that this violation has struck at the very heart of one's private space. But the metaphor is also a hopeful one. To discern the serpent is to have just cause and opportunity for its destruction. Mormonism was seen to fit the bill in the first two particulars. Even before the formal organization of the church, the *Book of Mormon* was published and circulated and missionaries began to add converts to the Mormon fold. And radical Mormon doctrines regarding God, scripture, “gathering,” and later, marriage, directly challenged those sacred spheres of church, family, and American society. In the final analysis, however, Mormonism was not so accommodating to the image of a palpable threat uncovered. This is because it was, paradoxically, very hard to see. Mormons were, after all, usually ethnically identical with one's neighbors and even one's family. In fact, the lack of discernible parameters to the Mormon community, the dread of its “invisible

tentacles," would be the greatest exacerbating factor in the anti-Mormon paranoia of the nineteenth century. This anxiety necessitated a reconstruction of this new community into one that was more readily identifiable.

The view of modern sociologists and other observers that Mormonism itself came ultimately to represent a "native ethnic minority" (Thomas O'Dea and Dean May),⁵ a "subculture" (Armand Mauss),⁶ a "global tribe" (Joel Kotkin),⁷ or simply "a religion that became a people" (Harold Bloom and Martin Marty)⁸ is powerful indication of how successfully Mormonism has been constructed into a distinct people with a distinctive set of identifying characteristics.⁹ Ironically, of course, assimilation in the late twentieth century has been so successful that in contemporary culture, "Mormon" can occasionally serve as shorthand for a certain vision of mainstream American values typified by healthy, patriotic, family-centered living. Nevertheless, that the term "Mormon" still functions as a powerful indicator of peculiar difference, in a way blatantly unlike, say, Protestant denominational tags, is evident in a perusal of any week's news items. One finds the media reporting that an FBI mole apprehended some years back "was a Mormon,"¹⁰ that one of Clinton's inspirational gurus is a "Utah Mormon and author,"¹¹ and that acclaimed scholar Laurel Thatcher Ulrich may be a "diligent and skilled historian, for sure. But the fact is . . . she's a very devout Mormon,"¹² and so on. A "Presbyterian CIA agent" or a "Methodist sociologist" would be an absurd juxtaposition. The journalistic appeal of the Mormon label is itself evidence that the term exploits a range of inferences and stereotypes that obviously involve more than denominational affiliation.¹³

This virtual ethnicity of Mormons, to which their cohesiveness as a body certainly contributed, is also in large measure a product of deliberate strategies of representation—strategies that both Mormons and non-Mormons had vested interests in perpetuating. To explain the reasons and strategies behind this construction and to explore the role popular fiction played in it are the central projects of this book.

I will begin by outlining the problem nineteenth-century writers and critics of Mormonism faced in reconciling a rhetoric of vituperation and a practice of exclusion with an ideology of Jeffersonian religious toleration and pluralism. One of the challenges Mormonism—like other heterodoxies—presented to its detractors, in other words, was that its religious radicalism was an opportunity for toleration at the same time it was an occasion for outrage. At those times when outrage carried the day, the pressures of pluralism made it desirable to cast the objectionability of Mormonism in nonreligious terms.

In chapter 2, I provide an overview of the history of the nineteenth-century "Mormon Problem" with its attendant violence and conflict from the perspective of one of its participants, Warren Foote. I turn to examine the sources of

that conflict in chapter 3. Nowhere will I suggest that social, economic, or political factors were irrelevant to the clash of religion and society. But I will maintain that none of these can be put forward as the central—or even a constant—factor in the long history of Mormon persecution. On the other hand, even when the theological dimensions of conflict are not decisive, they are inescapable and present a constant feature in anti-Mormon antagonisms.

In chapter 4, I situate Mormonism relative to contemporary heterodoxies to further illuminate what was distinctive and what was common about public hostility to this particular nineteenth-century religious innovation. The unique nature of the Mormon heresy I then explore in detail in chapter 5. Taking as my point of departure the claim of Rudolf Otto that the idea of the holy is the precondition for all religious experience, I suggest that Mormonism presents a reconceptualizing of the sacred that is not amenable to Christian orthodoxy. Its thoroughgoing demystification of the numinous, its radical historicizing of Christian origins, constitute a profanation of religion as it has been traditionally conceived and practiced in the West. Mormonism, in other words, is heretical not by virtue of the articles of faith to which it demands adherence, but rather by virtue of the kind of faith it can be said to disable.

Having ventured to assert the ubiquity of the religious factor throughout Mormonism's history of conflict and having defined the peculiar nature of the religious heresy Mormonism represented, I then turn in part II to examine what the study of fiction can corroborate about these claims. One problem with traditional approaches to religious intolerance is the seemingly reasonable assumption that such animosities are essentially comprehended by a focus on the sources of friction. So, while I argue that the Mormon image prevalent throughout most of the nineteenth century was largely a response to a perceived Mormon heresy, in chapter 6 I suggest that tensions can be compounded, facilitated, and exaggerated by prevailing norms and mechanisms of rhetorical practice. Construction of the Mormon image was profoundly affected by revolutions in publishing, literacy, and literary form that conditioned an entire generation of literature hostile to religious heterodoxy.

The particular strategies that popular fiction writers inherited and adapted to Mormon subject matter are analyzed in chapter 7. Pervasive patterns of representation in a host of examples demonstrate how Mormon ethnicity and character are constructed in such a way as to alleviate the dread of contagion posed by this "viper on the hearth." At the same time, these representations, by recasting a religious conflict in terms of political struggle and ideological self-preservation, reveal the ideological conflicts present when a secular, pluralistic democracy engages the heretical.

Finally, I turn to recent developments in the representation of Mormons in popular culture. It is a cliché in Mormon studies that Mormonism successfully adapted itself to mainstream culture by the mid-twentieth century. I don't

challenge this claim, but argue in chapter 8 that just as developments in rhetorical practice facilitated a public campaign against the religion in the nineteenth century, so have more recent developments conspired to restrain and domesticate literature of the hostile imagination in general. Still, the Mormon image in popular fiction was too versatile a tool to abandon once moral indignation became unmasked as bigotry. Recurrent uses to which Mormon characters have been put, in theater, television, and popular fiction, suggest the script may have changed considerably, but the resilient Mormon caricature has found new roles to play.